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Factors affecting teenagers' career indecision in southern Switzerland

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Abstract

In contemporary western societies making the first career choice after lower secondary education is not always easy and the number of undecided teenage students is increasing. Career indecision can push students to avoid decisions or to make "wrong" decisions which can affect their professional life, both in the short and long term. The purpose of the study presented here is to detect and describe relations between some personal characteristics, personality, self-esteem, perceived social support and career indecision, in order to highlight and understand which elements have greater influence on teenagers' career indecision in southern Switzerland. A longitudinal study has been designed: specific questionnaires were administered to 8th grade students, and will be repeated to the same students at the beginning and at the end of their 9th grade. Preliminary results indicate that some personality traits and self-esteem are significant predictors of career indecision. Moreover, self-esteem partially moderate the relationship between personality and career indecision.

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Keywords: Career indecision; Personality, Self-esteem; Perceived Social Support

1. Introduction

Career indecision, typically defined as the difficulties encountered by individuals while making career-related decisions (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996), can be a big problem for individuals who live moments of career transition, when important choices must be made. As a matter of fact indecision can push individuals into avoiding vocational choices or making wrong vocational choices (Gianakos, 1999). This is why indecision has been of large interest in the field of counselling psychology (for a review, see Forner, 2001). When experienced for a brief and limited moment, career indecision can be seen as an appropriate developmental experience. It can however become a strong personality trait –*indecisiveness*– which can limit the decision-making process in

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relation to career choices, and general choices too (Crites, 1969 ; Holland & Holland, 1977 ; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996 ; Santos, 2001; Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006). However, if we consider *situational indecision*, this should decrease or disappear with adapted intervention including for example the access to appropriate information and the exploration of the youths' values and objectives (Gordon, 1981 ; Ferrari, Nota, & Soresi, 2012).

Indecision –for different ages and in different career transitions– has been examined in depth and related to different psychological factors: it has been for example associated to career maturity (Rojewski, 1994), to decision-making style (Mau, 1995), to vocational barriers (Patton, Creed, & Watson, 2003), to the identity status (Vondracek, Schulenberg, Skorikov, Gillespie, & Wahlheim, 1995), to the affective dispositions toward the world (Larson et al., 1988 ; Saunders et al., 2000) and to locus of control (Kishor, 1981 ; Taylor, 1982 ; Santos, 2001). If we consider studies carried out in southern Switzerland (Donati, 1999; Donati & Lafranchi, 2007; Marcionetti, Donati, & Casabianca, 2010), two main difficulties have been detected. The first is the difficulty in complying with the compromise process through which individuals give up their favorite aspirations to choose others that seem "less compatible with itself" but more accessible (Gottfredson's *minor compromise*, 1981). Indeed, this process becomes more difficult and less voluntary when the individual must put aside acceptable alternatives and can even be very painful when the choice is limited to alternatives that the individual perceives as unacceptable (*major compromise*). The second difficulty detected was, for some young people and for different reasons, the almost complete absence of a reflection on the future and therefore on career. Both situations enter among those proposed by Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996). The difficulties highlighted by these authors are based on a model of the "ideal career decision-maker". This one has to be conscious of the need to make a career decision, wants to take a decision and is able to make an appropriate and adequate decision (which is based on a suitable decision-making process, and compatible with the person's objectives and resources) (Gati, Osipow, Krausz, & Saka, 2000). Any deviation from this ideal model is seen as a possible problem that can affect the individual's decision-making process in two possible ways: by preventing the person from making a decision or by pushing him or her to a less than optimal decision, as in the situations described above.

The main contexts in which adolescents grow and make career choices are family and school (Guichard, 1993): factors affecting career choices indissolubly relate the individual to these contexts. Considering family-related characteristics such as socio-economic status and foreign nationality, studies conducted in Switzerland attest that these are risk factors which predispose the individual to career decision procrastination (Perriard, 2005; Cattaneo et al., 2010). The family's socio-economic status and foreign nationality can in fact influence the youngster indirectly: for example foreign families recently arrived in Switzerland could have more difficulty understanding how the educational, training and work systems are organized. That can prevent the family from adequately supporting the youngster, for example when searching for information that would be useful to him or her. In this case, the family does not play an active negative role, as a creator of indecision, but rather, it refrains from playing a positive role in the construction of the professional identity of the youth (Lopez, 1989) unintentionally denying important support. The issue here is indeed related to family support (one of the dimensions of social support, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) that parents can provide the teenager and at the same time to the perception that the youngster has of this support. Several studies have indeed highlighted the importance of direct or indirect family and social support for psychological and physical well-being of individuals and demonstrated that social support acts as a buffer between stressful life events and symptoms (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Levitt et al, 1985).

Moving our focus to school-related factors, different authors argue that the school provides a specific context and identity possibilities in which the teenager creates his or her identity, including professional identity (Guichard, 2009). Implicit or explicit school rules, the content of school education, the recovery and the assessment which is made on it and the curriculum in which the youth falls, can categorize them in various ways: the attentive student or the agitated one, the gifted student or the ungifted one, the good or the bad student (Parsons, 1959; Lahire 1995; Ravaioli, 2008). These categories can be internalized by the student and become part of the way he/she perceives and thinks him/herself as a future worker (Kardiner 1939; Deschamps & Moliner, 2011). Academic performance also directly influences the professional future of students by opening or

closing access to schools and training opportunities. The school may also provide support to teenagers by offering the possibility of meeting a career adviser, or through the social support we have already mentioned before, which peers (friends in particular), teachers and other actors in the school can provide.

Other specific characteristics of the individual –such as gender and personality– were related to career indecision. Females are more likely to privilege services and social vocations while male students tend to prefer production and technologic vocations (Vouillot, 2011). This horizontal discrimination can impact on choices and career indecision, above all for female students who already have limited vocational options because of poor results.

Personality traits have also been related to career indecision: in particular neuroticism (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992; Santos, 2001), consciousness and extroversion (Beswick & Mann, 1994; Milgram & Tenne, 2000; Paunonen & Ashton, 2001) that can be related to different approaches to study and to school obligations. Finally, global self-esteem is another personal characteristic which has been negatively correlated to career indecision (Resnik, Fauble, & Osipow, 1970 ; Ferrari, 2000 ; Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002). Self-esteem is in fact an "overall estimate of general self-worth, a level of self-acceptance or respect for one-self (…)" (Guindon, 2002, p. 207). So low self-esteem could actually push people into avoiding situations in which their skills could be put to test, causing them, also, to avoid career choices. Coopersmith (1967) moreover showed that children and adolescents with high levels of academic self-esteem tended to be more exploratory, persevering and active participants in their academic environment. All the factors mentioned above define the resources and limitations of the individual in relation to career choice.

The goal of this research was to investigate these potential predictors of career indecision among secondary school students living in southern Switzerland. The global study is a longitudinal one: in the first phase questionnaires were administered to 8th grade students. The administration will be replicated to the same subjects at the beginning and at the end of their 9th grade (the last school year of ISCED2). Preliminary results of the first administration are illustrated here and discussed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The total sample consisted of 445 8th degree students, 208 girls and 237 boys, attending 7 schools from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Their ages ranged from 12 to 16, the mean age was 13.4 with a standard deviation of 0.6. Most of the teenagers were 13-year olds (n = 302). 321 were Swiss and 124 non-Swiss. 261 were attending an attitudinal curriculum in mathematics and 183 a basic curriculum. 275 were attending an attitudinal curriculum in German and 183 the basic one. Two specific activities are organized in southern Switzerland's middle schools for students with learning weakness: the *corso pratico* (applied course) was attended by 38 students and 157 students benefited from pedagogical support. Socio-economical status of the family was categorized in white-collar high skilled (n = 195), white-collar low skilled (n =120); blue-collar high skilled (n = 62) and blue-collar low skilled (n = 68). Participants expressed their enjoyment of learning: 93 answered "very low", 169 "low", 135 "average", 33 "high" and 4 "very high". Another question was on school commitment: 5 answered "very low", 42 "low", 135 "average", 226 "high" and 37 "very high".

2.2. Instruments

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet *et al.*,1988). To assess perceived social support the Italian-validated version of the MSPSS (Prezza & Principato, 2002) was used. This scale includes 12 items, which assess the perceived social support from the family, friends and one special person. The subjects of the study are asked to indicate to what extent they agree with statements such as "My family really tries to help me", "There is a special person who is around when I'm in need" or "I have friend with whom I can share my

joys and sorrows" on a 7-points Likert scale (from 1 very strongly disagree to 7 very strongly agree). The reliability of the scale in the original version is .88. The same Cronbach's alpha score was found for the Italian adaptation.

Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). To evaluate self-esteem, the Italian version of RSES by Prezza, Trombaccia and Armento (1997) was used. The scale consists of 10 items, each one related to a 4-points Likert response scale from 4 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Examples of items are "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of". The internal consistency of the scale is confirmed by a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

NEO-FFI-3 (McCrae & Costa, 2004, 2010). To assess personality traits, the Italian version of the NEO-FFI-3 was used. This questionnaire is a brief version of the NEO-PI-3. The NEO-FFI-3, consisting of 60 items, selects the five fundamental dimensions of personality described in the Five Factor Model by McCrae and Costa (1999): Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. The response scale used is a 5-points Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Career Decision-making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ; Gati, Krausz and Osipow, 1996). To determine career indecision the Italian version of the CDDQ (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2013) was chosen. This questionnaire is composed of 34 items assessing career indecision on 3 main subscales: lack of readiness, lack of information and inconsistency of information. Subjects are asked to express to what extent statements such as "It is usually difficult for me to make a decision" describe them on a 9-point scale from 1 "does not describe me" to 9 "describes me well". Gati, Krausz and Osipow (1996) reported that the median Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the scale scores were .78 and .77 (with an interquartile range of .67–.87 and .60 –.87) in the Israeli and the American samples, respectively.

2.3. Procedure and data analysis

In each school an online questionnaire was administered in the IT classrooms by the researcher. Information to students was given in accordance with ethic rules. The main modalities of data analysis used are descriptive and inferential statistics including correlations and hierarchical multiple linear regressions.

3. Results

3.1. Correlations

Correlations between personal characteristics, perceived social support (MSPSS), global self-esteem, big five personality traits and career indecision (CDDQ) were calculated (Table 1). Women scored higher on global perceived social support, on perceived social support from another person and from friends, and on agreeableness personality trait. Swiss nationality was negatively correlated with the attendance of basic curriculums in German and mathematics, of applied course and of pedagogical support. The last two activities are both thought for students with learning difficulties and their attendance correlates negatively with school commitment. As expected school commitment correlated positively with pleasure for study, with the perceived support from family and with the openness to experience and the conscientiousness personality traits. The global perceived social support positively correlated with extroversion and conscientiousness personality traits, with school commitment and pleasure for study. Self-esteem correlated positively with school commitment, with the perceived social support from family and with extroversion and conscientiousness personality traits; it correlates negatively with neuroticism. Finally, career indecision was positively correlated with nationality, with a basic mathematics curriculum, with the attendance of the applied course, and with neuroticism. Career indecision was instead negatively correlated with school commitment, self-esteem, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Table 1. Correlations between some personal characteristics, perceived social support (MSPSS), global self-esteem, big five personality traits and career indecision (CDDQ), with its subscales Lack of readiness (LR), Lack of information (LI) and Inconsistence of information (II)

		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**
1	Gender											
2	Nationality	-.05										
3	Curriculum in mathematics	.13**	-.24**									
4	Curriculum in German	.02	-.20**	.68**								
5	Applied course	-.08	-.21**	.30**	.29**							
6	Pedagogical support	.10*	-.18**	.43**	.44**	.23**						
7	School commitment	.14**	.12**	-.35**	-.36**	-.29**	-.29**					
8	Pleasure to study	.10*	-.04	-.05	-.11*	-.13**	.03	.38**				
9	MSPSS - Global	.37**	-.02	-.02	-.05	-.02	-.08	.29**	.19**			
10	MSPSS - Other	.37**	-.04	.03	.02	.01	-.01	.16**	.17**	.86**		
11	MSPSS - Family	.11*	-.03	-.07	-.05	-.06	-.10*	.29**	.29**	.76**	.54**	
12	MSPSS - Friend	.39**	.02	-.01	-.08	-.01	-.08	.09	.02	.79**	.54**	.32**
13	Global self-esteem	-.15**	.07	-.16**	-.16**	-.17**	-.20**	.30**	.14**	.18**	.12*	.28**
14	Neuroticism	.24**	-.08	.08	.11*	.05	.14**	-.12*	-.07	.01	.03	-.12*
15	Extraversion	.18**	-.03	-.10*	-.10*	-.05	-.03	.21**	0.1	.34**	.31**	.23**
16	Openness to experience	.14**	.05	-.07	-.08	-.12*	-.01	.26**	.22**	.20**	.25**	.16**
17	Agreeableness	.26**	.02	-.16**	-.13**	-.19*	-.12*	.23**	.14**	.21**	.15**	.12*
18	Conscientiousness	.08	.01	-.11*	-.14**	-.15**	-.09	.44**	.37**	.26**	.22**	.35**
19	CDDQ - LR	.02	-.15**	.03	-.02	.11*	.07	-.02	.07	.07	.07	.04
20	CDDQ - LI	-.02	-.09*	.07	-.02	.08	.09	-.10*	.01	-.01	-.03	-.04
21	CDDQ - II	-.12*	-.09	.17**	.06	.18**	.07	-.18**	-.05	-.08	-.08	-.09
22	CDDQ - Global	-.05	-.12*	.10*	.01	.14**	.09	-.12*	.01	-.01	-.02	-.04
		12	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**	**22**
13	Global self-esteem	.04										
14	Neuroticism	.08	-.50**									
15	Extraversion	.28**	.27**	-.13**								
16	Openness to experience	.08	.19**	-.01	.34**							
17	Agreeableness	.23**	.13**	-.17**	.25**	.17**						
18	Conscientiousness	.07	.48**	-.30**	.32**	.34**	.23**					
19	CDDQ - LR	.06	-.19**	.27**	.01	.05	-.09	-.04				
20	CDDQ - LI	.04	-.30**	.26**	-.06	-.11*	-.05	-.23**	.60**			
21	CDDQ - II	-.03	-.28**	.25**	-.11*	-.12*	-.23**	-.27**	.56**	.73**		
22	CDDQ - Global	.03	-.30**	.30**	-.07	-.08	-.13**	-.22**	.78**	.93**	.88**	

Note. *Gender: 0 = boys, 1 = girls; Nationality: 0 = non-Swiss, 1 = Swiss nationality; Curriculum in mathematics and German: 0 = attitudinal, 1 = basic; Practical course and Pedagogical support: 0 = not attended, 1 = attended.*
* p < *.05*, ** p < *.01*, *** p < *.001*.

3.2. Predicting career indecision using hierarchical linear multiple regressions

To measure the impact of demographics, self-esteem, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness on career indecision a hierarchical linear multiple regression was computed. In a first step all demographics that were significantly correlated with the main scale of career decision difficulties were introduced in the model. In a second step, self-esteem was introduced. Personality traits (neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness) were introduced in a third step (see Table 2).

When controlling for demographics, self-esteem explained 7% of career indecision variance (Model 2) and after controlling for demographics and self-esteem, personality traits explained another 3% of the variance (Model 3). The variance accounted by Model 3 was 14% which indicated that 86% of the variance remained to be explained. Further analysis repeated hierarchical multiple linear regression on the three subscales of CDDQ. Results indicated that Model 3 ($R^2 = .11$; $F(8, 438) = 6.59$, $p < .001$), with nationality ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$) and neuroticism ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), significantly predicted Lack of readiness. Model 3 ($R^2 = .12$; $F(8, 438) = 7.46$, $p < .001$) better predicted Lack of information, with self-esteem ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$), neuroticism ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$) and conscientiousness ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$) as significant predictors. Model 3 predicted even better Inconsistence of information ($R^2 = .16$; $F(8, 438) = 10.09$, $p < .001$) with self-esteem ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .05$), neuroticism ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$), agreeableness ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .01$) and conscientiousness ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$) emerging as significant predicting variables.

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses on career indecision

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	*SEB*	*β*	*B*	*SEB*	*β*	*B*	*SEB*	*β*
Nationality	-0.26	0.16	-0.08	-0.26	0.15	-0.08	-0.25	0.15	-0.08
Curriculum in mathematics	0.11	0.16	0.04	0.07	0.15	0.02	0.05	0.15	0.02
Practical course	0.46	0.27	0.09	0.34	0.26	0.06	0.36	0.25	0.07
School commitment	-0.13	0.09	-0.08	-0.01	0.09	0	0.05	0.1	0.03
Self-esteem				-0.08	0.01	-.28**	-0.04	0.02	-.16*
Neuroticism							0.04	0.01	.17*
Agreeableness							-0.01	0.01	-0.06
Conscientiousness							-0.02	0.01	-0.08
Total R2			0.04			0.11			0.14
ΔR^2						0.07			0.03
F			3.89*			10.36**			8.93**

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

In this first hierarchical regression self-esteem was added in the model before personality traits. Another hierarchical regression was computed in order to assess the incremental validity of self-esteem on personality traits, in predicting career indecision (see Table 3). In this case, after controlling for demographics in Step 1, personality traits were added in Step 2 and self-esteem was added in Step 3 (see Table 3). The hierarchical regression revealed that self-esteem had a significant incremental validity. After controlling for demographics, personality traits (neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness) explained 9% of the career indecision variance. After controlling for demographics and personality traits, self-esteem explained 1% of career indecision variance. Considering that the three personality traits considered were related to career indecision and self-esteem, and that self-esteem was related to career indecision after controlling for the three personality traits, the hierarchical regressions done suggested that self-esteem might partially mediate the relationship between personality traits and career indecision. This partial mediation was associated with 6% of career indecision

variance. The Sobel (1982) tests confirmed that self-esteem significantly mediated the effect of neuroticism, Z=3.35, p<.001, agreeableness, Z=-2.42, p<.01, and conscientiousness, Z=-4.56, p<.01, on career indecision.

Table 3. Predicting career indecision using personality and self-esteem

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	*SEB*	*β*	*B*	*SEB*	*β*	*B*	*SEB*	*β*
Nationality	-0.26	0.16	-0.08	-0.25	0.15	-0.08	-0.25	0.15	-0.08
Curriculum in mathematics	0.11	0.16	0.04	0.08	0.15	0.03	0.06	0.15	0.02
Practical course	0.46	0.27	0.09	0.41	0.25	0.08	0.36	0.25	0.07
School commitment	-0.13	0.09	-0.08	-0.02	0.1	0.02	0.05	0.1	-0.03
Neuroticism				0.06	0.01	.24***	0.04	0.01	.18**
Agreeableness				-0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.01	0.01	-0.06
Conscientiousness				-0.03	0.01	-.13*	-0.02	0.01	-0.08
Self-esteem							-0.05	0.02	-.16**
Total R2			0.04			0.13			0.14
ΔR^2						0.09			0.01
F			3.89**			8.92***			8.93***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion and conclusion

The first formation or vocational choice made during adolescence has an important impact in the short term but also in the long term professional life of individuals. Different factors seem to have an impact on career choices and on career indecision. Preliminary results of this study show positive correlations between career indecision and non-Swiss nationality, with a basic mathematics curriculum, with the attendance of the applied course, and with neuroticism; and negative correlations with school commitment, self-esteem, and the agreeableness and conscientiousness personality traits. Self-esteem and neuroticism were shown to predict career indecision and self-esteem was found partially moderating the relationship between personality traits and career indecision.

However, most of the variance of career indecision remains to be explained. Perceived social support, in particular from the individual's family does not show any correlation with career indecision but correlates positively with self-esteem and with all personality traits, excluding neuroticism with which it correlated negatively. Future analysis should investigate social support in depth. It is then probable that in further phases of this longitudinal study, relations between variables will become stronger. In fact, at the time of this first questionnaire administration (i.e. at the middle of the 8th grade), the teenagers were still quite far from the moment of their "final" choice (i.e. the end of the 9th grade). The approach of the end of compulsory schooling will probably have an impact on the level of decision / indecision and relations between some variables such as scholar curriculums, school commitment and family support could increase.

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